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EXPOSITORY PREACHING.

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III.¹

THE best encomium on the Bible is the use of it. Vain are our elaborate compliments and eulogies, if in the practical work of creating and developing Christian character we use the Bible only as a collection of disjointed texts, rather than as the record of an actual divine unfolding in the lives of breathing, struggling men and women. The strictest theories of inspiration have often been held by men who in preaching showed no vital acquaintance with the "holy men who spake from God, being moved by the Holy Ghost." On the other hand, a mild doctrine of inspiration is frequently held by such men as Maurice, A. P. Stanley, and R. F. Horton, who have yet insisted that the only solution of present problems is the exposition of the great principles of righteousness which emerge at every stage in Israel's history.

But an advance in this matter is certainly to be discerned in the last twenty-five years. The preachers of the preceding generation had not felt the influence of the historic method, and history was to them a panorama, not a progress. Israel's story was to them a series of wax figures divinely modeled, rather than an evolution divinely inspired. Canon Liddon sometimes made the dome of St. Paul's ring with genuine exposition, but he was most at home when, dropping all drapery, he demonstrated and applied the truth. Beecher was, of course, a law unto himself, and if he expounded, it was an exposition of the marvelously varied life of the Plymouth pastor. Horace Bushnell did not attempt expository preaching—the whole temper of his mind was against it.

¹ See the BIBLICAL WORLD, February, 1898, pp. 81-90; May, pp. 319-24.

But in our own time almost all our most efficient prophets have relied largely on exposition. Phillips Brooks is a conspicuous exception. He stayed with the text just long enough to extract its kernel, and then mounted into the sky, like the lark "that singing still doth soar and soaring ever singeth." When he announces as his theme "The Beautiful Gate of the Temple," we think surely we are to have a study in the apostolic age at last. But lo, the "beautiful gate" turns out to be an allegorical representation of childhood, and a secondary poetic suggestion of the text is preferred to its primary meaning. This method he pursues with all his rich resources and exhaustless imagination, but it is a method possible only for a true poet, and ever verging toward the fanciful and the fantastic.

But Wm. M. Taylor's substantial volumes on Daniel, Joseph, etc., show on what strong meat his great congregation was fed, while Henry Drummond's *Greatest Thing in the World* was only a luminous exposition of a single New Testament chapter. The great religious conferences and conventions of our time are largely meetings for scriptural study, and the devotional literature of our day is chiefly spiritual exposition. When the multitude is reached today, it is not by some brilliant sacred oration, but by some such patient unfolding of the Scripture as Meyer's *Shepherd Psalm* or Andrew Murray's *With Christ in the School of Prayer*.

Such a method of study and of presentation will counterbalance the critical habit necessarily fostered in the ministry by modern educational methods. Creative impulse is often repressed by microscopic investigations, and the student loses the forest in the trees. The student can dissect verses and assign them easily to component documents, but often he cannot make a historic character real to himself or anybody else. He understands the record, but not the men or movements behind the record, and the Bible is to him as a stained-glass window—he looks *at* it instead of looking *through* it. Hundreds of men can appreciate the experience of Dr. R. S. Storrs, who affirms that he could preach better when he went into the seminary than when he came out of it. He had become critical and self-

distrustful, and to some extent lost the creative power which was his native gift. Hundreds of students can prove the existence of two Isaiahs, but have never felt the thrill of real contact with either of them. Hundreds of men are like Browning's "Grammarian":

He settled *Hoti's* business — let it be !
 Properly based *Oun* —
 Gave us the doctrine of the enclitic *De*,
 Dead from the waist down,

but they have never reached the Grammarian's final resting place,

. . . where meteors shoot, clouds form,
 Lightnings are loosened,
 Stars come and go !

Let us glance at a few examples of modern exposition, to catch, if possible, their secret and method. The foremost textual preacher of our age is, of course, Alexander Maclaren. Every sermon is saturated in scriptural thought and phraseology, and a lifetime of habitual Bible study lies behind every sermon, as mountain snows lie behind brooks in the spring. Not often, however, does he make a historical character, or period, or movement the subject of a sermon. When he does, the result is admirable. Witness the sermon entitled "A Death in the Desert."

Introduction: A picture of aged, lonely Moses as he breasted Nebo's mountain, and went up to be seen no more. We see:

1. The penalty of transgression. The loftiest saint does not escape the law of retribution.
2. The withdrawal, by a hard fate of the worker on the very eve of the completion of his work. A great unfinished life, nobler than a completed one that has realized all its petty, shabby purposes.
3. The solitude and mystery of death. No assurance of immortality. Contrast the tomb and death of Jesus.
4. The uselessness of dead leaders to a generation with new conflicts. Christ alone is never antiquated.

Here is not merely admirable arrangement of thought, but historic sympathy, power to make the past live again, and fine insight into the meaning of an event which marked the changing of the old order "giving place unto the new."

Joseph Parker's gigantic work *The People's Bible* is familiar to us all, and is truly a work of great suggestiveness and of original power. At times it rises to sustained eloquence, and it is never dull. But it belongs to the second order of an exposition, not the first, *i. e.*, it is really a running commentary, full of brilliant gleams and sudden vistas and apostrophe and pathos, but constantly "going off at a word," and losing the main current of the history in the fascinating eddies along the shore. It is most stimulating and fertilizing, but it shows us the landscape by lightning flashes rather than by the clear light of noonday. In this respect Dr. Parker is at the farthest remove from Frederick Robertson. Compare, for example, the treatment of the old age of Solomon by those two preachers. "Solomon's Backsliding" is the title of Dr. Parker's sermon. The thought of the exposition runs thus :

Solomon's strange wives ; his sinful religious toleration ; his outward pomp and its dangers ; the way in which one sin leads to another ; the perils of old age ; "various suggestive expressions ;" the complexity of the human heart ; the divine anger ; the divine compassion.

Such a treatment is redeemed from being desultory and heterogeneous only by the genius of the preacher, which is able to fuse discordant materials into an effective discourse. But Robertson has taken up the same theme under the title of "Solomon's Restoration" :

Introduction : The perennial interest in biography.

- I. The wanderings of an erring spirit.
 1. Partnership with foreigners, brilliant, dazzling, accomplished.
 2. Unrestrained pursuit of pleasure.
 3. Absorption in commercial enterprise.
- II. The guidance of that spirit, amidst all its wanderings, by God's love.
 1. Weariness of existence (assuming him to be the author of Ecclesiastes).
 2. The chastisement of doubt.
 3. Through sin he was led to "the conclusion of the whole matter," spiritual manhood.

Thus we see how, out of our own doubt and difficulty, may come blessing ; and we learn the perseverance of the divine love.

No one can read such a sermon without becoming acquainted with King Solomon; with the salient events in his career; the marked traits in his character; the significance of his place in Israel's story, and the abiding lessons of his life. It is such thorough work as this that led Phillips Brooks to say of the few sermons of Robertson left to us: "In all the best qualities of preaching they stand supreme among the sermons of our time."

If one wishes to see how Robertson focused the biblical narratives on problems of the present, let him turn to "An Election Sermon," delivered on the eve of a parliamentary election, when popular interest was at fever heat. Resolving to express no opinion as to the merits of either candidate, the preacher proceeds to expound the election of Matthias to the apostleship:

- I. The object of the election—to elect a bishop of the universal church, not to secure a party triumph.
- II. The mode of the election—popular suffrage, overruled by divine guidance; appeals to chance *vs.* appeals to God.
- III. The spirit of the election.
 1. Religious—they prayed as they voted.
 2. Conscientious—a spirit which makes bribery impossible.
 3. Unselfish—personal interests should be forgotten as we exercise the sacred right of suffrage.

Such a sermon not only makes the past live again; it gives to the problems and petty procedures of a town election all the dignity and grandeur with which centuries have invested the hasty election of Matthias. It is instructive to compare Joseph Parker's treatment of the same event—the light flashes all around the horizon, but leaves no unified impression. In the same way we might compare Robertson's memorable discourse on "The Character of Eli" with Dr. Parker's on "The Causes of Eli's Overthrow." But both preachers agree here. They are intensely modern, keenly alive to impending issues, political and social, and both of them find that the best way to preach patriotism without partisanship, and to rebuke social wrongs without per-

sonal denunciation, is to expound the immortal narratives of the Old Testament.

Quite a different style of treatment, with a far greater wealth of scholarship, yet just as deep sympathy with current events, is to be found in George Adam Smith's "Isaiah." Take, for example, his study of "Israel in Exile." The thought is as follows :

The probable route which the captives followed, from Jerusalem to Babylon ; famous sites in history ; at last the Euphrates' "rolling greatness" contrasted with Israel's "uncertain brooks;" the country a monotonous level from which the homesick people "lifted up their eyes unto the hills;" description of the land, climate, population ; how Israel settled down ; the despair of it ; yet captivity gave them leisure for literature, fifty years of study of their scriptures, and a taste for commerce ; developed sense of sin and suffering ; thus Israel became a people with (1) a conscience, (2) a great hope, (3) a great opportunity, and (4) confidence in the divine Word.

In the presence of such examples no true minister can be content to leave untried the vast possibilities of expository preaching. It is not the only method, not the best method for every man, but it is a method which will develop unsuspected resources, save from narrowness and routine, and bring a man at the same time into touch with the noblest history and the latest of current events.

It now remains only to suggest certain passages which easily lend themselves to such treatment. The list will be indefinitely extended by anyone who really tries the method. We may classify the passages as follows :

Narratives : The call of Isaiah (the voice, the volunteer, the consecration).

The call of Hosea (through domestic tragedy, understood long after).

The early failure of Moses (angered by industrial chasm between Egyptian and Israelite, and smiting Egyptian in useless rage).

The meeting of Cornelius and Peter (the enlargement of both).

Addresses : Paul to the elders at Miletus (a train of thought rather than course of events).

Paul at Antioch (his use of the Old Testament).

Christ's first recorded sermon (his method of exposition).

Characters : Saul (development of complex personality).

Barnabas (an almost forgotten apostle).

Nicodemus (his three appearances in the gospels).

Mary, the mother of Jesus (her real *vs.* her ecclesiastical character).

The obscure men of the Bible (*vide* Maclaren's "Quartus, a Brother").

Songs: The Song of Deborah (Israel attaining consciousness of national unity through repelling a common foe).

Psalm 15 ("Who shall abide in thy tabernacle?").

The Magnificat (*vide* Canon Liddon).

Subjects: Paul's collection for the saints (cause, method, principles).

The administration of the Spirit in the apostolic church.

The epistle to Philemon (light on Paul's character, on sociology of the New Testament).



MADONNA AND CHILD—MURILLO